

FEATURE



Miranda Doyle

doylem@loswego.k12.or.us

RETHINKING THE “RESTRICTED” SHELF

It's the whispering and giggling that tips you off, and the growing circle of students gathering around a book or computer screen. They've discovered something, all right, and it's probably not just a funny cat video or a particularly fascinating diagram of a medieval castle.

Maybe it's a book about puberty, or an art book with a few nude paintings. Maybe it's a book about a family with two moms, or a novel with four-letter words. It might be a title about drugs, violence, gangs, or graffiti. Maybe it's just a sensitive topic—dealing with death, mental illness, or abuse, for example. Last year at one of my junior high schools it was an unabridged dictionary that defined the F word (hey, my students know how to find words in a print dictionary, not just on Dictionary.com—I was impressed).

It's tempting to put all of our potentially controversial titles behind the circulation desk, on the “professional” shelf, or in the counseling office. We figure that students who need them can always ask, and it eliminates all that giggling. Besides, what if students actually check the book out and take it home, and then there's a complaint? But the truth is, with that barrier to access, those books are now essentially off limits to students. The reader who might

browse books on sexual identity if they are on the regular shelves is far less likely to walk up to the circulation desk and request them.

It also sends a message that there's something wrong or inappropriate about the topics covered by those restricted books. Yet we want our collections to embrace diverse groups of people and broad points of view. If we pulled out every book that might make someone uncomfortable, the shelves behind the desk would grow by leaps and bounds.

This might be a good time to take a look at the books we keep behind the desk, in the professional collection or otherwise, and rethink our reasons. If it's really a resource primarily for teachers, fine. But if those titles are segregated from the regular collection so that we can shield ourselves from difficult conversations, maybe it's time to put them back where they belong.

If you haven't had a chance to look at the Top Ten Most Frequently Challenged Books for 2014, you'll find it at <http://www.oif.ala.org/oif/?p=5390>. The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom released the list in April. Many prominent news outlets, including CNN and the *Washington Post*, reported on the list.

It's interesting to note that eight of the ten books “reflect diverse authors and cultural content”—ranging from the Native American main character in *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* to the penguin with two dads in *And Tango Makes Three*. Author Malinda Lo, who analyzed the makeup of the books on the challenged lists for the past 15 years, noted in a blog post (www.diversityiny.com/2014/09/book-challenges-suppress-diversity/) that “diversity is actually under attack. Minority perspectives are being silenced every year.” Where do you want your library to fit into this issue? I invite you to consider how you can act in opposition to this attack, and choose to support diverse voices instead.

Reprinted with permission from the Oregon Association of School Libraries.



Miranda Doyle is OASL's Intellectual Freedom Chair and the librarian for Lake Oswego School District.

As a teenager, she may have stealthily read a few books located in the 613s—books she was way too embarrassed to actually check out.

Miranda has an MLIS from San Jose State University and is National Board Certified in Library Media.